

# We successfully treat drug addiction with medication

## Your Turn

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Guest columnist

Can we treat drug addiction with medications that some might consider “just another drug”?

While some may think this sounds like substituting one “vice” for another, the scientific and anecdotal evidence indicates the answer is an emphatic “Yes!”

A key tool in combating opioid, heroin and alcohol addiction in Shasta County has been Medication Assisted Treatment or MAT. Combined with cognitive behavioral therapy, support groups, and other tools, the use of medications like Suboxone, Methadone, and Vivitrol are helping many local people overcome debilitating addictions and become contributors to our community.

Historically, our society has viewed addiction as a moral failing and that the cure required one to simply muster the willpower to quit. But our scientific knowledge of substance use disorders has continued to grow, and we now understand addictions are caused by a confluence of biological, environmental and

social factors.

Most medical associations now classify addiction as a medical condition, and it makes sense that medication can be part of a successful treatment plan, just as it is for diabetes or other chronic illnesses.

Many people suffering from addiction have had to rely solely on support groups or abstinence-only 12-step programs, but HHSA is excited to be at the forefront of expanding evidence-based treatment options. Medication Assisted Treatment is a vital part of this effort.

Opioids can sometimes be used effectively to treat pain. But in other cases, opioid use leads to powerful addiction because it floods the brain’s pleasure circuits with dopamine, which provides a temporary euphoria. It relieves anxiety and reinforces in the decision-making hubs of the brain that drugs are rewarding.

While the addictions may begin as a chase for that euphoria, eventually they become simply about staving off painful withdrawals.

For people using these drugs, their lives can become rollercoasters, stagger-

ing between euphoric highs and crushing lows. Medication Assisted Treatment helps temper the powerful cravings without inducing euphoria. It allows people to get their lives back on track and focus on their treatment.

Crucially, Medication Assisted Treatment dramatically also reduces the chances they’ll overdose or contract dangerous diseases from infected needles. In the last 10 years, Shasta County has averaged about 22 opioid-poisoning deaths and about 45 alcohol-related deaths annually.

HHSA is playing a leading role in expanding the use of Medication Assisted Treatment in Shasta County, saving and restoring lives in the process:

■ Two of our psychiatrists prescribe Suboxone and some clients are benefiting from the treatment.

■ We contracted with Aegis to support the opening of a satellite Methadone unit, and we are moving toward a full methadone clinic with therapeutic services on site early next year.

■ We just received a small grant to start a Medication Assisted Treatment learning collaborative for staff at Proba-

tion, the District Attorney’s Office, the Public Defender, the jail and other county officials.

■ We’re one of the lead agencies in the NoRxAbuse coalition, which has been instrumental in promoting and expanding medication-assisted treatment by local physicians. Coalition members also hold MAT provider support meetings.

■ We’re working on implementing a new Medi-Cal “organized delivery system” to streamline the screening and referral for drug treatment in our region.

Medically and scientifically, we are moving past the era when we thought of addiction as a character problem. By recognizing that addiction is a medical condition, we in turn as health care providers have the responsibility to provide the appropriate array of medical remedies.

Medication Assisted Treatment is ultimately the logical result of reducing the stigma and stereotypes surrounding addiction. People with substance use challenges need the best help we can provide, not condemnation.

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